

YOUR TOWN GOT YOU DOWN?
WE'VE GOT YOUR ESCAPE
PLAN. THESE 20 STARS OF
AMERICA'S 21ST-CENTURY
RENAISSANCE ARE RIDING
A WAVE OF CIVIC REINVEN-
TION AND FRESH IDEAS.

BEST
TOWNS
2008>

PRO-
GRESSIVE
CANDIDATES

1. Washington, D.C.

THE REVIVAL: High crime, buttoned-up Beltway vibe, sweltering summers, a coked-out mayor, taxation without representation, and eight years of an unpopular administration aren't great for a city's image, but don't let all that stuff fool you. D.C. has been busily working for change lately.

After Marion Barry made a mess of the mayor's office, Congress exercised its right to rule



Georgetown

and took charge in 1995. When the D.C. regained control, in 2001, the money started pouring in, jump-starting a civic revival overdue since the race riots of 1968. Run-down neighborhoods—northwest's Adams Morgan, U Street, and Chinatown—began attracting young entrepreneurs. “D.C. has seen an influx of independent business owners,” says Warren Brown, a lawyer turned baker who opened hugely popular CakeLove on U



Adams Morgan

THE WORD ON THE STREET: D.C.

“Don’t think D.C. is all about politics; it’s full of diversity, and practically any adventure you want is within a three-hour radius of the city.” —SARAH WHITING, SUBSCRIBER

Street in 2002. “Before that, it was like ‘Where’s the creativity?’” In the Capitol Riverfront ’hood, along the Anacostia River, the Nationals’ new baseball stadium debuted this spring as the first LEED-certified ballpark in the country. And this summer, D.C. launched the country’s first bike-share program, with a fleet of 100 four-speed cruisers; \$40 gets you a year of access all over town.

THE LIFE: Just ask young, ultra-fit D.C. mayor Adrian Fenty. The three-mile run along the National Mall, from Capitol Hill to the Lincoln Memorial, is, um, monumental. Off-road, 1,754-acre

Rock Creek Park offers 40 miles of urban trails, or ride or run the C&O Canal towpath in Georgetown. Upstream, Great Falls offers Class V rapids. On U Street, chill with some vino at Cork, then catch live jazz at Bohemian Caverns.

—KATIE ARNOLD

THE STATS:

Pop. 581,500

Median age: 35

Med. household income:

\$51,900

Med. home value: \$437,700

Avg. commute: 29 mins.

Largest employers (metro):

Federal government, Lockheed Martin, Northrop Grumman, SAIC, Inova Health, U. of Maryland

2. Chattanooga, Tennessee



THE REVIVAL: Chattanooga’s surrounded by mountains and rivers, but like so many manufacturing towns, it turned its back on its natural assets. In the mid-’60s, the city went from industrial boom to rusting bust when local steelmakers and foundries closed their doors, leaving a decrepit, nearly abandoned downtown and a community in dire need of an aesthetic and economic overhaul.

The Tennessee River flows through town, and urban renewal in the ’90s centered on a total do-over of the nearly nonexistent waterfront, including construction of an aquarium and ten-mile river walk; 2002 saw \$120 million invested in, among other things, a pedestrian pier, free public boat slips, and the new Renaissance Park, on the North Shore. “That’s the Chattanooga way,” says forester Gene Hyde of the community-driven overhaul. The Greenspaces program will invest \$2 million over three years to transform downtown condos, offices, and shops into LEED-certified buildings;

the Take Root project recruits locals to plant some 2,000 trees in the urban forest; and there are plans to develop 100 miles of singletrack within ten miles of Chattanooga by 2010. All of which has remade

Bright Idea

Use Your Head

OXFORD, MISSISSIPPI (POP. 14,100)

In Oxford, bookish is beautiful. Despite Mississippi’s ranking last in high school graduation and among the highest in poverty, the town has developed into a cultural hub for the Deep South by taking full advantage of its local institution of higher education, Ole Miss, and by celebrating its unique literary history—both William Faulkner and John Grisham have called Oxford home. The town taps into that history as much as possible, whether through the museum at Rowan Oak, Faulkner’s home, or with its famous Double Decker Arts Festival, held each spring. Even the town’s mayor is in on the game—he’s the owner of the independent bookstore anchoring the town square. And this fall, the Mississippi hamlet will take a national spotlight as it hosts the first general-election presidential debate—expect an unfettered flow of ideas on the nation’s future. Just don’t be surprised if the best ones come from the Oxonians themselves.

—RYAN KROGH



Faulkner's Rowan Oak

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: MASSIMO BORCHI/CORBIS; MATT McLELLAN; EDWIN REMSBERG/ALAMY; ADAM WOOLFITT/DIGITAL RAILROAD. OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: GAVIN HELLIER/CORBIS; TABITHA SOREN; STEVE KASHISHIAN/ADVOCATE; ALEX BRANDON/AP

BEST TOWNS 2008



Georgia's Rock City Gardens, outside Chattanooga

THE WORD ON THE STREET: CHATTANOOGA

"A very scenic, very happening, and very easy place to live, with unlimited options for climbing, caving, biking, hiking, and paddling." —PATRICK JOHNSON, SUBSCRIBER

downtown into a live/work/play crossroads with half a dozen parks, a new organic grocer, and the annual Riverbend music festival, which spans nine days and six stages.

THE LIFE: The much-revered Tennessee Wall serves up year-round trad climbing, and mountain bikers flock to Raccoon Mountain—both just a few minutes from downtown. Chattanooga's best carbo load comes compliments of Aretha Frankenstein's, an all-day pancake

joint in the up-and-coming North Shore district. —K.A.

THE STATS:

Pop. 151,900

Median age: 38

Med. household income:

\$37,000

Med. home value: \$119,900

Avg. commute: 19 mins.

Largest employers: BlueCross BlueShield of Tennessee, Hamilton Co. Dept. of Education, Erlanger Health, Tennessee Valley Authority, McKee Foods

BEST TOWNS continued inside foldout

Bright Idea

Do It Yourself

NEW ORLEANS, LOUISIANA (POP. 327,000)

You say you want a reconstruction? In the Big Easy, it's the regular folks, with help from a host of smart non-profits, who are resurrecting the city. BY WELLS TOWER

Rocheblave Street, in New Orleans's Broadmoor district, resounds with the squabbling of wild parakeets and the whine of power tools. It's a Monday morning in late April in this recovering 2,400-home neighborhood, initially marked for demolition

by the mayor's rebuilding commission. The breeze is thick with the smell of fresh paint. The street is nearly shadowless, the Louisiana sun unbroken. This pronounced absence, open sky where the crowns of trees formerly reigned, is the **continued on page 113**



Connick at his Habitat for Humanity-sponsored Musicians' Village, one of the many philanthropic endeavors born in the wake of Hurricane Katrina



Q&A

Hometown Hero

Harry Connick Jr. on the new New Orleans BY WELLS TOWER

OUTSIDE: How did the Musicians' Village come about?

CONNICK: Branford Marsalis and I were driving from New Orleans to the Houston Astrodome to visit some of the people there, and we started talking about what we could do. It's turned out to be a great success, thankfully.

New Orleans musicians tend to be a pretty freewheeling, independent tribe. Why was it important to build a place for them to live together? To have a home. Most of these people were renting before. Now they own their own homes. It's an incredible feeling. It's a great place to be, so they're pretty excited.

When you talk to folks in New Orleans about who's rebuilding the city, they talk about you, Brad Pitt—entertainers, not the government. Katrina literally blew

the lid off of a lot of problems, as tragic as it was. Not only the class and race issues but governmental issues. But it's over. Enough already. People are constantly talking, blaming, and—you know, be quiet and do the work. The city itself is just an incredible place, and people want to be a part of it, people who live here and people who visit. We don't want that to go away, and I think folks are going to keep on moving ahead.

What else are you up to these days? The Village is still kicking, and we're just keeping going. I'm also doing a movie down here called *Living Proof*. It's the true story of a doctor who came up with a successful treatment for breast cancer. [What Connick doesn't mention is that he managed to get the studio to move the entire production to New Orleans, providing a huge boost to the local economy. —Ed.]

3. Ogden, Utah

THE REVIVAL: A hundred years ago, this Utah outpost—45 minutes north of Salt Lake, in the foothills of the Wasatch—was a hopping railroad junction. But after the diesel engine and I-15 came through, in the '50s and '60s, Ogden faded into anonymity as a blue-collar manufacturing burg with gobs of overlooked natural assets.

(the brainchild of climbing legend and Ogden native Jeff Lowe), aquatic centers, and a velodrome. For now, Ogden is unpretentious and adrenalinized. And, unlike in Boulder, you can still nab a midcentury brick bungalow right in town for less than 200 grand.

THE LIFE: When more than nine inches of snow hits the



The 25th Street Car and Motorcycle Show

Soon after 38-year-old mayor Matthew Godfrey took office, in 2000, he hatched a mad plan: Transform Ogden into the adventure-sports capital of America. “Boulder pales in comparison to what we have,” says Godfrey, who took an “If you build it, they will come” approach and green-lighted the construction of two kayak parks (the Class III–IV Ogden and Weber rivers flow through town); a paved trail network; and a rec center complete with climbing wall, vertical wind tunnel, and standing surf wave. Soon after, ski-brand giant Amer moved its HQ to town, along with 20 other outdoor-gear makers. Next up: a year-round, holographic ice tower

mountains, Ogden rings the “powder bell” and locals hightail it to uncrowded Snowbasin, 20 minutes away. Come summer, mountain bikers hammer the Shoreline Trail’s 20 miles of foothill singletrack. The Bing-ham Cyclery’s café/bakery, on the Ogden River, is the rendezvous point for A.M. caffeine and weekend rides. —K.A.

THE STATS:

Pop. 81,000

Median age: 29

Med. household income:

\$36,500

Med. home value: \$114,700

Avg. commute: 22 mins.

Largest employers: IRS, McKay-Dee Hospital, Weber School District, Autoliv, Weber State U.



Antelope Island, in the Great Salt Lake

THE WORD ON THE STREET: OGDEN
“Don’t tell too many people about it.”

—JERYL DETMER, SUBSCRIBER

Bright Idea

Find Your Center

OAKLAND, CALIFORNIA (POP. 397,000)

Want to curb urban sprawl, boost the economy, and reduce inner-city crime? Get people to move downtown. It worked for Jerry Brown. In 1999, Oakland’s then-mayor decided to direct more of the city’s focus on downtown Oakland through his 10K Housing Initiative, a plan to attract 10,000 new residents to the city center by streamlining the permit process and creating economic incentives for developers. The result? More than 10,000 housing units are in various stages of planning or completion—far surpassing the original goal—and the area is home to some 40 new restaurants, 15 new art galleries, and 18 new nightclubs. Even the skyline is different, thanks to a 20-story condo complex on Lake Merritt and a nearly completed 22-story high-rise on Grand Avenue. All this in a town that, according to Rand McNally, has the best weather in the country.

—R.K.



BEST TOWNS 2008

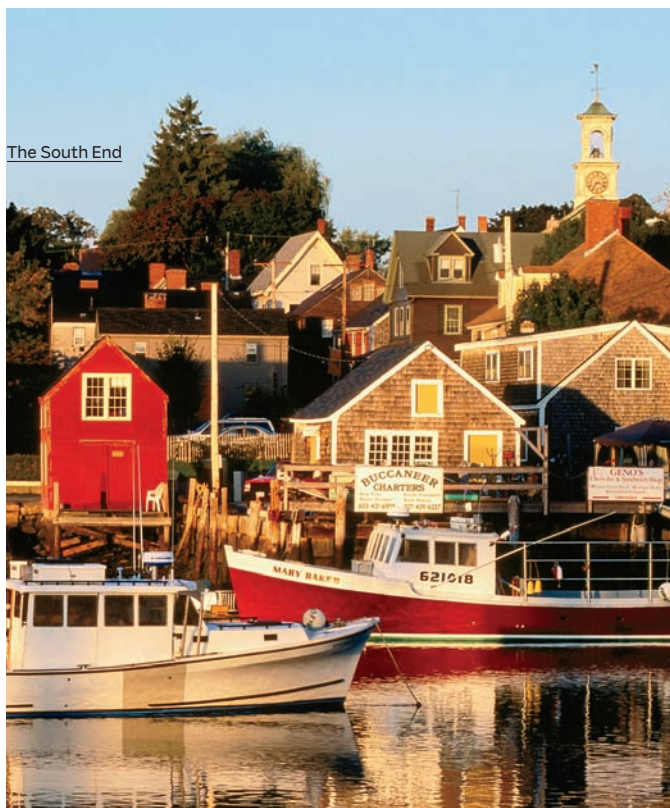
4. Portsmouth, New Hampshire

THE REVIVAL: A shipbuilding center in the 18th century, this Piscataqua River town, just upstream from the coast, lost its best customer (the British) after the War of 1812, and its historic waterfront quickly turned Skid Row. In the '70s, urban planners threatened to raze the place, but preservationists blocked the wrecking ball.

Are cobblestone streets and tchotchkes still de rigueur? Sure, but Portsmouth is now an unexpectedly hip town with a decidedly DIY vibe. "Some things have stayed the same, but plenty has changed," says historian J. Dennis Robinson of the city's old-and-new vibe. These days, this compact, walkable city an hour from both Boston and Portland has become a magnet for emerging musicians and

artists—with eight indie theaters, including the renovated Music Hall (circa 1878), half a dozen galleries, a film fest, a slow-food movement, and live music seven nights a week at the Press Room and other hole-in-the-wall clubs. (When the alternative newsweekly invited local bands to record albums, it got 165 submissions.) Homegrown creative startups like Hatchling, a boutique animation firm, and the Button Factory, a warren of artists' studios, have taken over downtown's brick warehouses. And, thanks to the Smuttynose and Redhook microbreweries, even the beer is locally crafted.

THE LIFE: In June, New Hampshire became the first state to mark its (admittedly small) portion of the East Coast Greenway, a 3,000-mile multi-use



The South End

THE WORD ON THE STREET: PORTSMOUTH

"We have the best of both worlds, no matter the season. Enjoy the water, or drive an hour to the White Mountains or Boston." —RHONDA STACY-COYLE, SUBSCRIBER



The California State Railroad Museum

Bright Idea**Think Big**

SACRAMENTO, CALIFORNIA (POP. 453,800)

Why transform only a section of the city when you can transform the entire region? That's what Sacramento is hoping to do with its Railyards project, one of the largest urban-restoration initiatives in U.S. history. Once the terminus of the 1869 Transcontinental Railroad, downtown Sacramento has more recently been known as a terminal wasteland. Now the Railyards is offering the city a 240-acre blank slate of real estate to reenvision its future on. The plan calls for some 12,000 housing units, more than half a million square feet of retail space, a museum, plazas, a marketplace, and even a new rail center. It will take 20 years to complete, but when it's finished it will nearly double the size of the downtown business district, bringing in an estimated \$2.7 billion of business per year. Some of which has already arrived: Since 2007, 23 restaurants have opened downtown, along with 37 retail stores and a number of new hotels, including the Citizen, a 197-room boutique hotel, opening this fall, whose name was chosen by... the citizens. —R.K.

trail that runs parallel to the coast from Maine to Florida. For pretty reliable waves, try the sandy beach breaks at Jenness Beach or the Wall, about five miles south of town on Route 1A. For the best fresh seafood, head to Pesce Blue. —K.A.

THE STATS:

Pop. 20,600

Median age: 38.5

Med. household income:

\$45,200

Med. home value: \$318,000

Avg. commute: 22 mins.

Largest employers: Liberty Mutual, Portsmouth Regional Hospital, City of Portsmouth, Lonza Biologics, Demoulas Market Basket

5. Tacoma, Washington

THE REVIVAL: Except for a brief heyday in the 1880s, when the Northern Pacific Railroad was completed and "the City of Destiny" became its western terminus, this Puget Sound port has been overshadowed by Seattle, 30 miles north. In the 1980s, trains stopped running to Union Station, and Tacoma's business district became a dead zone.

But nothing breathes new life into an inner-city ghost town like a couple thousand college kids. In 1990, the University of



The Sound to Narrows 12K

THE WORD ON THE STREET: TACOMA

"Mount Rainier, a mild climate, Point Defiance Park, scuba diving, clean air, Commencement Bay, no state income tax ..." —LUCINDA WEDDLE, SUBSCRIBER



Commencement Bay and Rainier

with the renovation of a number of 1920s-era vaudeville theaters and the construction of several new museums, Tacoma's now known as a vibrant arts center. The city's 2006 cleanup of the Thea Foss Waterway, once a toxic Superfund site, prompted a major rethink of the languishing Commencement Bay waterfront. "Our vision is to increase urban density while respecting the natural space," says the city council's Marilyn Strickland.

"We've tapped only about one-tenth of its potential." An \$84 million initiative will expand an already extensive parks system, which includes 702-

Washington opened its Tacoma campus, on Pacific Avenue, and Union Station was resurrected as a federal courthouse. Plus,

acre Point Defiance. With 15 miles of trails, a kayak launch, and squid jigging off Tacoma Narrows, it's one of the largest city parks in the country.

THE LIFE: On a clear day, Rainier's snow cone looms, just 40 miles away, and it's just 60 to the slopes of Crystal Mountain. Divers take the South Sound plunge at Titlow Beach, but kayaking Commencement Bay is the after-work adventure du jour. On Sixth Avenue, locals enjoy fresh oysters at Asado and live music at Jazzbones. —K.A.

THE STATS:

Pop. 199,700

Median age: 36

Med. household income: \$44,300

Med. home value: \$228,300

Avg. commute: 24 mins.

Largest employers (county): Fort Lewis, Tacoma Public Schools, McChord Air Force Base, State of Washington, MultiCare Health

6. Ithaca, New York

THE REVIVAL: It's not too hard to shine when you boast more than a little Ivy League intellect, but even this progressive, two-college town at the foot of upstate New York's Finger Lakes has had a run of bad luck. In the '60s, the loss of small-scale manufacturing along the city's Cayuga Lake waterfront sent Ithaca into prolonged stagnation.

Thankfully, with Cornell University and Ithaca College facing off above town, locals didn't have to look far for creative solutions. Phase one: transforming two and a half blocks of downtown into the Commons, a mid-'70s version of Burlington's and Boulder's trendy walking malls. Things got crunchier in 1996, when the country's largest EcoVillage, a 60-home sustainable community with two organic farms, opened outside of



Enfield Glen gorge, in Robert H. Treman State Park, outside Ithaca

Bright Idea**Refurb Suburbia**

LEVITTOWN, NEW YORK (POP. 44,000)

American suburbs have always lacked originality, but the country's first suburb, Levittown, 20 miles east of New York City, is breaking the mold. Green Levittown, a unique partnership that exemplifies the best kind of civic harmony, has brought together the city government, a regional nonprofit, and local businesses to send canvassers door to door, explaining the benefits of going green (e.g., saving money) and then helping them do it. The changes range from simple—like converting to compact fluorescent lightbulbs, 12,000 of which were given away—to more ambitious, like replacing inefficient heating boilers. Homeowners are offered special low-interest loans to help pay for the upgrades, and businesses—from a solar-panel manufacturer to a local appliance store—offer their services at reduced rates. So far, more than 1,800 homeowners have signed on, and the goal is to reduce the city's carbon emissions by 10 percent this year alone. It's heartening proof that residents, businesses, and the environment can all win. —R.K.

BEST TOWNS 2008

**THE WORD ON THE STREET: ITHACA**

"Where else in the U.S. does the Dalai Lama have a residence?"

—JENESS RUHANEN, SUBSCRIBER

town. The pace of change has only escalated in the past ten years, with a much-needed spiffing up along Cayuga's shores. Two miles of paved waterfront trail have already been finished, with four more to go, and local visionary Mack Travis and his son, Frost, are cleaning up and transforming the Ithaca Gun factory (a crumbling brick structure with a lead-contaminated field next to 150-foot Ithaca Falls) into condos. Downtown, the old Woolworth building is now the library, an abandoned printing plant is now live/work, and the EcoVillage is adding another 30 homes.

THE LIFE: Locals cycle centuries around Cayuga, trail-run portions of the 562-mile Finger Lakes Trail, and hike to Lucifer Falls, in nearby Robert H. Treman State Park. The legendary veggie Moosewood Restaurant has been a Seneca Street landmark since 1973. —K.A.

THE STATS:

Pop. 30,000

Median age: 22

Med. household income:

\$21,400

Med. home value: \$183,500

Avg. commute: 14 mins.

Largest employers: Cornell U., Ithaca College, BorgWarner, Ithaca City School District, Cayuga Medical

Bright Idea**Make the Switch**

CORVALLIS, OREGON (POP. 49,800)

Corvallis is far from the undiscovered jewel it once was—it's within 90 minutes of world-class skiing, the Oregon coast, and blue-ribbon salmon fishing—but in recent years the city has picked up verve from a new promenade on the Willamette River and a steady transition to renewable energy. In 2006, Corvallis became the second U.S. city (after Moab) to be named an EPA Green Power Community. Thanks in part to Pacific Power's Blue Sky Program, 15 percent of power users—from the city government to businesses to residences—are participating in the purchase of renewables like wind and geothermal power. The green push began in 1997 as part of the town's 20/20 Vision Statement, a blueprint guiding all aspects of the town's growth until 2020. The new riverfront park, completed in 2002 as part of the vision statement, has helped attract more than a dozen new cafés, restaurants, and spas, proving that being farsighted isn't so bad after all.

—R.K.

Bright Idea**Return to Your Roots**

WILMINGTON, NORTH CAROLINA

(POP. 95,900)

A famed railroad town and ship-building port during WWII, Wilmington suffered mightily after the war effort ended. But Port City recaptured its past glory by turning to ... its port. The state's ports authority purchased skyscraper-size cranes to handle cargo containers, and the city invested millions to preserve historic buildings along the waterfront. The efforts helped attract new businesses, diversify the economy, and make Wilmington one of America's fastest-growing cities in the nineties. With nearby beaches along the Cape Fear coast, an ever-expanding Riverwalk, a National Register historic district comprising more than 230 blocks, and a renewed economy that has been fueled partly by an active filmmaking sector, "Wilmywood" has become much more than a shadow of its former self.

—R.K.

7. Louisville, Kentucky

THE REVIVAL: Louisville, a hub for higher education, horse culture, and bourbon distillation since the 19th century, never quite hit bottom. But this independent-minded, even-keeled city on the Ohio River—it's not quite the South, not quite the North, and not quite the Midwest—took a turn for the worse in the '70s and '80s, when locals fled town for the 'burbs and urban rot set in.

As luck would have it, though, back in the 1890s prescient city fathers hired landscape guru Frederick Law Olmsted's firm to design more than 1,500 acres' worth of urban parks. In 2005, longtime mayor Jerry Abramson announced ambitious plans to create 4,000 acres of new greenspace and link all city parks with a 100-mile walk-and-bike trail. To date, 23 miles of the Louisville Loop have been completed, winding through woodsy, historic neighborhoods dating back 150 years. The cyclist mayor has also added 40 miles of bike lanes to city streets and required that all new roads be built with designated lanes. Downtown is rebounding with a vengeance, fueled by a surge in the local logistics business—UPS moved some

THE WORD ON THE STREET: LOUISVILLE

"Big-city action, small-city price, hometown feel."

—ANDREA HIGGINS, SUBSCRIBER



The Kentucky Derby, above, cult music shop Ear X-tacy

BEST TOWNS 2008

of its operations here in the early '80s, and in the past decade more than 100 other companies have followed—and over \$2.5 billion in new construction.

THE LIFE: Proof on Main, in the new 21c Museum Hotel, is the city's hippest address, with contemporary art on the walls and 50 Kentucky-made bourbons on the menu. Located almost entirely within city limits—who knew?—6,200-acre Jefferson

Memorial Forest offers easy-access hiking, fishing, camping, and horseback trails. —K.A.

THE STATS:

Pop. 701,500

Median age: 39

Med. household income:

\$43,400

Med. home value: \$141,600

Avg. commute: 21 mins.

Largest employers: UPS, Ford, Norton Healthcare, Humana, Jewish Hospital & St. Mary's Healthcare, GE



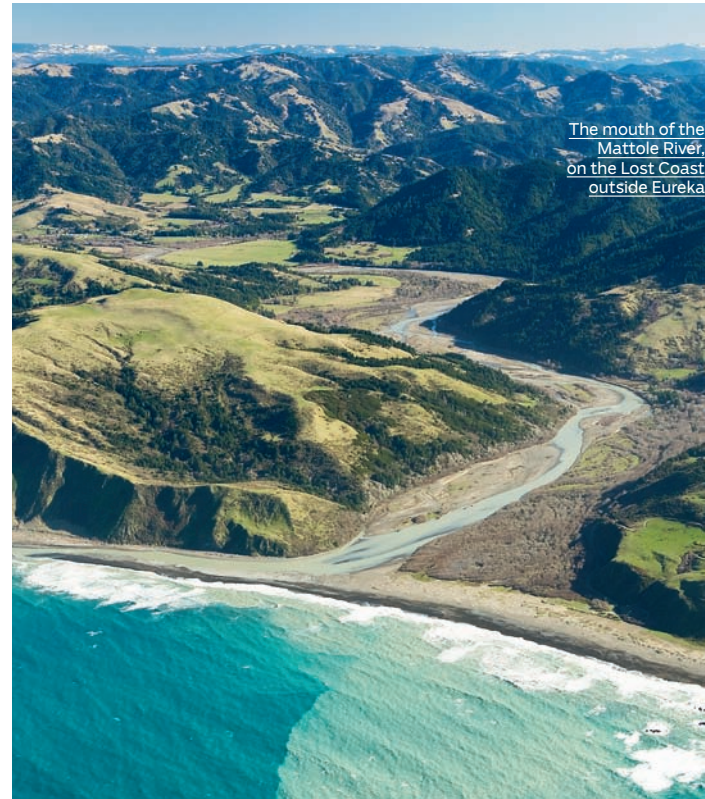
Bright Idea

Start at the Top

SEATTLE

(POP. 582,500)

Want a green city? Elect a green mayor. Want a green planet? Elect Seattle's mayor, Greg Nickels. Since taking office in 2001, Nickels has been at the forefront of fighting global warming, convincing more than 850 U.S. cities to sign on to his U.S. Conference of Mayors Climate Protection Agreement, which aims to meet or beat Kyoto Protocol targets. Not surprisingly, Nickels is just as devoted to his own constituents, doing everything from installing hundreds of bike racks around the city to backing a \$75 million renovation of iconic Pike Place Market. As with his national agenda, it's his green initiatives here that get the most attention, like bringing the city's fleet of hybrid vehicles to 330 (plus the one Nickels traded his Town Car for), and his newest planet-saving brainstorm: placing a 20-cent "green fee" on all paper and plastic shopping bags, with the city providing free reusable bags for residents. For Seattleites, grassroots are great, but it also helps to have a good head on your shoulders. —R.K.



The mouth of the Mattole River, on the Lost Coast outside Eureka

THE WORD ON THE STREET: EUREKA

"Great atmosphere, and you can travel from five to 30 minutes and be completely surrounded by wilderness."

—CINDY SHERER-HORN, SUBSCRIBER

8. Eureka, California

THE REVIVAL: Four hours north of San Francisco, Humboldt County is home to half the world's old-growth redwoods, so for much of its 155-year history, timber was king. With the remaining trees mostly off-limits, Eureka's economy has been in dire need of diversification these past few decades.

Counterculture roots (wayward San Fran hippies have long found refuge here) and prime real estate on Humboldt Bay, however, have helped make Eureka an emerging NoCal arts capital. Last year saw the reopening of the 1920 Sweasey Theatre, in Old Town, a historic district dotted with hundred-year-old Victorians. Small independent businesses and boutiques that had fled for the malls in the seventies, depressing downtown in the process, are moving back. Long a haven for more traditional painters, Eureka's gone mod in the past few years, with the

opening of contemporary-art spaces like Accident Gallery, in an old warehouse/roller rink. A five-block boardwalk has breathed new life into the waterfront along Humboldt Bay, which still generates about two-thirds of the state's oyster harvest and is kept clean by Humboldt Baykeeper.

THE LIFE: A bridge connects Old Town Eureka to Woodley Island, which shelters an egret rookery and has a marina that rents sea kayaks. When the harvests are bountiful, crabbers sell their catch right off the boat for \$4 a pound. Head south 30 minutes to Humboldt Redwoods State Park to mountain-bike or 20 minutes north to Trinidad to surf. —K.A.

THE STATS:

Pop. 27,000

Median age: 37

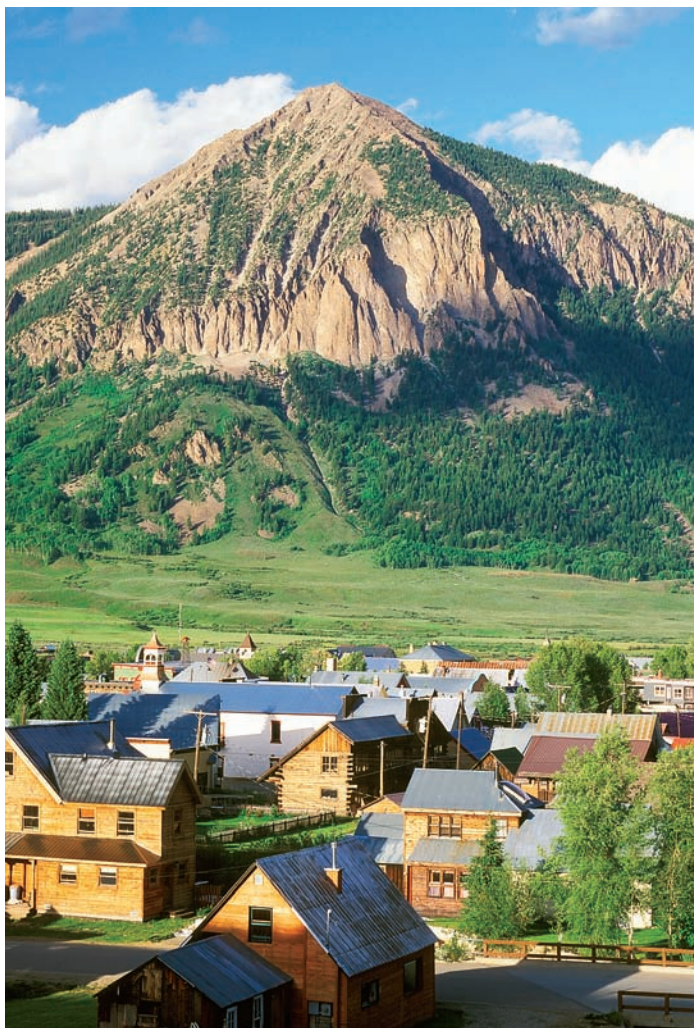
Med. household income:

\$29,600

Med. home value: \$262,250

Avg. commute: 15 mins.

Largest employers: City of Eureka, Schmidbauer Building Supply, SN Servicing, Costco, the Times-Standard



9. Crested Butte, Colorado

THE REVIVAL: Crested Butte made its name as a coal town in the 1880s, then relaunched 80 years later as a ski bum's nirvana. But thanks to inconsistent snowfall and a remote, road's-end location at the foot of the West Elk Mountains, hard times came calling in the late '80s.

The energy returned when the town's eponymous ski resort changed hands in 2004. News of its imminent modernization

triggered a real estate feeding frenzy, with dilapidated Victorians and miners' shacks alike starting bidding wars. Now, with long-awaited upgrades under way at the ski area—including a totally revamped base area, swank lodges, and the possible, controversial expansion to adjacent Snodgrass Mountain—"Colorado's last great ski town" is all buzz. Once the holdout of elite athletes, former hippies, and powder dropouts, down-to-earth CB is attracting a new crop of young families and telecommuters looking for a laid-back and affordable alternative to glitzy counterparts like Telluride and Aspen. There's a boutique bookbinder on Second Street, a new farmers' market every Sunday in summer and fall, and a steady stream of locals on cruiser bikes.

THE LIFE: The '80s saw a slow and steady proliferation of singletrack outside town, making the Butte a



The Third Bowl,
Crested Butte Mountain

BEST TOWNS 2008

THE WORD ON THE STREET: CRESTED BUTTE

"It's a beautiful place, the skiing is sick, and the bike trails are sublime. A quirky community of wonderful people."

—J.C. LEACOCK, SUBSCRIBER

true trail-riding mecca. Even on a sleety night, you'll see locals taking to the Lower Loop with snow-suited toddlers strapped in back, and half the town volunteers to maintain their beloved trails, like the legendary 401. Fly-fishing, hiking, and skiing are literally just out the back door. —K.A.

THE STATS:

Pop. 1,600

Median age: 31

Med. household income: \$41,250

Med. home value: \$301,100

Avg. commute: 10 mins.

Largest employer: Crested Butte Mountain Resort



At the Blue Hole,
outside Charlottesville

Bright Idea

Seek Balance

CHARLOTTESVILLE, VIRGINIA

(POP. 40,300)

Back in the '70s, when Charlottesville's now iconic downtown pedestrian mall was being constructed, three dozen willow oak and ash trees were planted along the central walkway. By the '90s, the mature trees were paying off, drawing people downtown to the shady sidewalks. C-ville took notice and kicked off a management plan for its urban forests. This year the city is using GPS and satellite imagery to inventory the trees on all its public land and analyze the city's tree canopy. The information will be used to balance out the natural environment within the urban surroundings, both for environmental benefits, like air quality and carbon sequestration, and for aesthetic appeal. To offset the urban-heat-island effect, the city has installed green roofs on city hall and the police station, with a goal of covering 40 percent of the city in green. Charlottesville is finally reaping the rewards of having planted a few key seeds.

—R.K.

BEST TOWNS 2008

10. Columbia, Missouri

THE REVIVAL: Before the University of Missouri was established, in 1839, Columbia—in the rolling foothills of the Ozarks—was just a stagecoach stop en route to California. As it grew, it became a hub for higher education (downtown boasts three colleges) and insurance firms but gained a rep as a staid, boring, and straitlaced community in need of a makeover.

Done. CoMo is swinging these days. In 2000, local filmmaker David Wilson, 33, helped open the Ragtag Cinema, a small indie-film house downtown. Four years later, he co-founded True/False, an annual documentary-film festival that draws international raves and is at the forefront of Columbia's creative revival. Developers have retrofitted old meatpacking warehouses into SoHo-style lofts and art spaces. Nearby, you'll find "the Diaper Factory," which houses a dance troupe, artists' studios, and a café. This summer, the 1928 Tiger Hotel will get a boutique facelift, complete with requisite mod eatery. Columbia recently scored a \$22.5 million



The 63 Diner

THE WORD ON THE STREET: COLUMBIA

"My stress level is half what it was on the East Coast, and so is my rent. Heaven for cyclists." —EMMA MARRIS, SUBSCRIBER

federal grant to develop a city-wide trail system to add to its 65 urban parks, including 32-acre Capen Park, with its limestone top-rope routes.

THE LIFE: The nine-mile, run-or-ride MKT spur links down-

town Columbia with the Katy Trail, a 225-mile rails-to-trails traverse that follows Lewis and Clark's route along the Missouri River. Nearby Easley Hill is central Missouri's toughest bike climb, and boaters float the mighty Missouri from Catfish

Katy's to Cooper's Landing, 90 minutes downstream. Back in town, fresh-obsessed Sycamore sources its ingredients from local farms and growers, and Shakespeare's is the locals' pick for pizza. —K.A.

THE STATS:

Pop. 92,900

Median age: 28

Med. household

income: \$38,300

Med. home value: \$164,700

Avg. commute: 15 mins.

Largest employers: U. of Missouri, Columbia Public Schools, Boone Hospital, City of Columbia, MBS Textbook Exchange



Nearby Shelburne Farms

Bright Idea**Grow Your Own**

BRATTLEBORO, VERMONT
(POP. 11,700)

Even for dedicated locavores, the 100-mile diet is mostly an idealistic notion. But for the residents of Brattleboro, buying local is a way of life. The small town hosts one of the largest farmers' markets in New England, with 50-odd regional vendors; is home to more than half a dozen Community Supported Agriculture, or CSA, farms, selling shares of everything from apples to pork; and has a local-food co-op that boasts more than 4,500 members, almost half the population. Nearly every store on Main Street is locally owned, stocks local products, or markets itself as fair trade. Brattleboro nonprofit Post Oil Solutions promotes community gardens for residents and organizes weeklong locavore challenges in which participants source all of their food from within the state. Farms sell starter kits for the event, restaurants serve special entrées, and residents even hold nightly potluck dinners. In Brattleboro, the best stuff is always just around the corner. —R.K.



Goofing at the U of M



The Columbia Festival of the Arts



The Twilight Festival

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